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▶ Previous Story ▶ Next Story

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- Metro/State Wayne
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- Macomb
- Livingston
- Commuting
- Obituaries
- Death Notices
- Schools
- Special Reports
- Editorials
- Columnists
- Detroit History
- Nation/World
- Nation/World
- Politics/Gov
- Census
- Health
- Religion
- Technology
- Sports
- Sports Insider
- Lions/NFL
- Pistons/NBA
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- High Schools
- Golf
- Motor Sports
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Friday, January 7, 2005

Ohio voting problems show need for election reform

By U.S. Rep. John Conyers Jr.

This week, for only the second time in our nation's history, Congress debated the issue of accepting a state's electoral college votes -- in this case, Ohio. While Ohio's

votes were ultimately accepted, our democracy has been elevated by Congress' willingness to frankly discuss allegations of voter disenfranchisement in the state that decided the presidential election.

In forums I held in Washington, D.C., and Columbus, Ohio, I learned of massive and unprecedented voter irregularities in Ohio. These irregularities are listed in a 100-page report I issued and include:

- The misallocation of voting machines led to lines of 10 hours or more that disenfranchised scores if not hundreds of thousands of predominantly minority and Democratic voters. In Franklin County, 27 of the 30 wards with the most machines per registered voter showed majorities for George W. Bush, while six of the seven wards with the fewest machines delivered large margins for John Kerry.

- Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell's decision to restrict provisional ballots resulted in the disenfranchisement of tens if not hundreds of thousands of voters, again predominantly minority and Democratic voters. In Hamilton County, this resulted in the absurd result where hundreds of voters who showed up at the right polling place, but were directed to the wrong table by election workers, had their ballots thrown out.

- Blackwell's widely reviled decision to reject voter registration applications based on paper weight. Amazingly, forms obtained from the Secretary of State's office do not comply with his own paper weight directive.

- The Ohio Republican Party's decision to engage in pre-election "caging" tactics, selectively targeting 35,000 predominantly minority voters for intimidation, had a negative impact on voter turnout. The Third Circuit Court of Appeals has found these activities to be illegal and an indirect violation of consent decrees barring the Republican Party from targeting minority voters for poll challenges.

- The Ohio Republican Party's decision to use thousands of partisan challengers concentrated in minority and Democratic areas also disenfranchised tens of thousands of legal voters, who were not only intimidated, but became discouraged by the long lines in the adverse weather.

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Editorials

- Editorials index fr
- Friday, January 7, 20
- Spare Middle Cla:
- College Grant Squee
- Warren and Other
- Holdouts Should
- Consolidate Elector
- Detours Ahead fo
- Charities Adjusting t
- Law Change
- Chisholm paved t
- for women, blacks
- Ohio voting probl
- show need for elect
- reform
- Troop levels in Ir
- spark battle
- Web reviews on s
- books would help pe
- Two Water System
- Be One Too Many
- Future Retirees M
- Price of Delayed Dec
- Missing Turkeys
- Symbolize Conyers'
- Indifference
- Failed pipeline m
- accepted industry
- standards
- Mich. social servi
- director faces challe
- Evolution proves
- place in schools
- Michiganians str
- with teaching evolut
- Children will beh
- when parents lay do
- law instead of going
- strike
- Higher gasoline t
- faces bumpy road

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• Blackwell's decision to prevent voters who requested absentee ballots but did not receive them on a timely basis from being able to receive provisional ballots.

We were left with no choice but to debate these matters on the House and Senate floors when not a single election official in Ohio provided us with any explanation for these massive and widespread irregularities.

We never received an explanation for the machines in Mahoning County that recorded an untold number of Kerry votes for Bush.

We never learned why so many lawfully registered voters were not on the voting lists in Cuyahoga County, or how a little known third party candidate could receive 20 times more votes than any third party candidate in history in many Democratic-leaning precincts.

And we never learned why a Republican voting machine company was granted unilateral and unsupervised access to voting computers in scores of counties in Ohio prior to the recount.

We knew the debate would not change the outcome of November's election. But out of this week's debate, I hope Congress will respond to the calls of millions of citizens to fix the myriad flaws we experienced on Nov. 2, 2004.

We can begin to do so by appointing a select committee of the House and Senate to get to the bottom of what went wrong in Ohio on election day.

We also need to enact real election reform -- that gives all citizens the right to a provisional ballot; that gives all voters a verifiable paper trail; and that bans election officials from serving as campaign chairs. If Americans are dying in Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of fair elections, the least we can do is make sure every vote is counted in this country.

Four years from now, I hope we will have an election all our citizens can be proud of.

U.S. Rep. John Conyers Jr. of Detroit is the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee. Send letters to (313) 222-6417 or letters@detnews.com.

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